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SUBJECT: FOR ADVISORY COUNCIL CHAIRMAN, NATIONAL SECURITY
TRUMPS LABOR RIGHTS

(SBU) KEY POINTS

-- Mohammed Bin Mubarak Al-Khulaifi, the Chairman of Qatar's Advisory Council, told Ambassador September 8 that Qataris view the rights of foreign workers in Qatar through the prism of national security.

-- Qataris consider the overwhelming presence of foreigners in the country (88 per cent of the country's estimated 1.7 million population) a great social and political threat, he said.

-- For this reason, exit permits for foreign laborers would continue to be obligatory. Likewise, the draft labor sponsorship law will include no provision forbidding employers from confiscating and holding workers' passports, al-Khulaifi predicted. He was unmoved by Qatar's Tier 3 TIP ranking; Qatar's national security was of greater concern.

-- The Ambassador pointed out that not only did the victims of human trafficking in Qatar suffer, but the international reputation of Qatar suffers as well, given Qatar's Tier 3 ranking.

(SBU) COMMENT

-- That's al-Khulaifi's view, but his view is not dispositive.

-- The MFA's Minister of State for International Cooperation and Conferences, Dr. Khalid Bin Mohammed Al-Attiyah, is arguing for a system where contracts between sponsors and employees would govern their relationships, not an inflexible sponsorship law.

-- The Ambassador and Al-Attiyah agreed on the formation of an informal working group to improve information sharing for the Human Rights and TIP reports. With more information sharing, the Qataris will have a better view on what additional actions they should take, and the Embassy, having more information, will be in a better position to advise them.

-- David Caudill, Embassy's Human Rights Officer, will take the lead in information sharing arrangement with representatives of the National Human Rights Committee and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

END KEY POINTS AND COMMENT

1. (U) On September 8, the Ambassador paid a courtesy call on Mohammed Bin Mubarak Al Khulaifi, Chairman of Qatar's Advisory Council (Note: The Advisory Council is a consultative body consisting of 35 members appointed by the Amir. It debates the merits of proposals under consideration by the Amir and makes recommendations to him before he takes

final action. End Note). Ambassador inquired about the pending draft law on labor sponsorship before the Advisory Council. Human rights contacts in Qatar had expected the law, once finalized, to ease some of the more troubling restrictions of the current sponsorship system, especially the exit permits required of workers leaving Qatar to ensure that they have secured prior approval from their employers. It was also hoped that the new law would prevent employers from retaining the passports of foreign workers present in Qatar.

¶2. (SBU) The Chairman advised the Ambassador that the draft law is currently before a special committee of the council empaneled to study the issue and make recommendations to the full body. He expected the committee to make its recommendations to the Council when the Advisory Council convenes in October. The Council will then either accept those recommendations in full or make further changes and then forward the report of its deliberations with its recommendations to the Amir.

¶3. (SBU) Pressed on the specifics of the draft law, Al Khulaifi stated that the exit permit system would remain unchanged and that sponsors would continue to be allowed to retain workers' passports. He stressed that the Qatari leadership views the issue of labor rights as one of national security, adding that the country would not allow itself to be victimized by those who would commit crimes (Comment: presumably to include instigating labor unrest) and then flee the country. The Chairman said that the exit permit system allows the authorities to verify that the workers have clean criminal records when they leave the country. He cited the

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examples of other Gulf countries who expanded the rights of laborers and then saw crime rates increase as a path Qatar did not wish to follow.

¶4. (SBU) The Ambassador responded that Qatar's international reputation suffers because of its labor rights and human trafficking record. Al Khulaifi said that he and the country's leaders were aware of that fact, but that Qataris are a minority of 200,000 in a nation of 1.7 million and cannot allow themselves to be overwhelmed. He believed that the current system provides sufficient protection for workers in cases of abuse and in disputes with employers over wages and living conditions and hoped international observers would take note of this.

LeBaron